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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANGKOK 007920

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [KCRM](#) [PREF](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [TH](#) [LA](#) [KTIP](#) [LAOS](#)

SUBJECT: STATUS OF MISSING HMONG CHILDREN REMAINS UNCLEAR

REF: VIENTIANE 001301

Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR SUSAN M. SUTTON FOR REASON 1.4 (B, D)

¶11. (C) Summary. The current location and status of the 29 Lao Hmong children and teens reported arrested last month remains unclear. A National Human Rights Commission official believes that the children remain in immigration detention in Nong Khai, Thailand, while second hand reports from the Lao Hmong refugee community suggest that they were deported to Laos earlier this month. Reactions from Thai security officials range from silence to denial. Post will continue to energetically push for a clear understanding of, and hopefully positive resolution to, this case. End Summary.

WEEKS OF UNCERTAINTY

¶12. (C) Following reports in early December that Thai officials had arrested and possibly deported 29 Hmong children and teens from the Petchaboon settlement, Post has been working closely with NGO contacts and Embassy Vientiane to determine the fate of this group. Reftel details the background on the case and Embassy Vientiane officers' efforts to locate the group in Laos.

STILL IN THAILAND...

¶13. (C) According to Khunying Ambhorn Meesook, a close Embassy contact and member of the National Human Rights Commission of Thailand who has been following this case, the children remain in immigration detention in Nong Khai, Thailand, awaiting eventual deportation to Laos. Ambhorn confirmed the basic story we have heard so far: the children were arrested in late November after illegally leaving the Petchaboon settlement area to visit a local church. (Note. Most of the Lao-Hmong in Petchaboon are illegal immigrants and technically subject to deportation at any time, but Thai authorities have allowed them to remain in the area under the specific condition that they do not travel out of the camp. End Note.) Following their arrest, the children were transferred to the Nong Khai immigration office pending deportation. Their parents were reportedly told by local police to travel to Nong Khai to be reunited with their offspring, wherein each family would be sent back to Laos. The parents refused. According to Ambhorn, the children are in relatively good condition and being well fed.

...OR DEPORTED TO LAOS ALREADY

¶14. (C) UNHCR contacts in the Hmong community--some related to the missing children--have a different story. Following their arrest, the children contacted family members by cell phone to report that they were in Nong Khai and that they would be deported on December 5. On December 5, the children called again and said they were being put into boats to be sent to Laos. An hour after the second call, a member of the group contacted the families again saying that they were "on the other side" but couldn't talk because of the police around them. Since this call, there have been anecdotal reports of individual children from this group possibly contacting family members to say they were in Laos, prompting some of the families to reach out to friends and relatives in Laos to help track down the children, to no avail.

DEPORTATION? OR EXTORTION GONE BAD?

¶15. (C) Further confusing the story (or shedding real light on it) are reports from an independent NGO in Petchaboon and second-hand stories from the Petchaboon Hmong that current or former Thai police officials have offered to "return" the children for money. These offers have come and gone--at one point they were allegedly retracted because the story was too "high-profile." While such a kidnap for ransom effort may be new to the community in Petchaboon, the Hmong there have been targeted by a variety of groups and individuals in a series of other schemes. One local American NGO worker estimates that the Hmong have been extorted out of nearly one million baht (about \$25,000) in the last year. Indeed, a second Thai NGO contact believes that the children are being held in Nong

Khai, but not in the immigration detention facility.

16. (C) Thai security and local government officials have done little to alleviate this confusion. Repeated calls to our contacts from the Thai National Security Council (NSC) have yielded no substantive response. The Petchaboon governor confirmed earlier this month that the group had been arrested and sent to Nong Khai for deportation but was too "busy" to comment on the case this week. Intrepid efforts by Embassy Vientiane officers to contact Thai immigration officials in Nong Khai (which is directly across the river from Vientiane) produced an even more confused reaction: the Thai immigration chief first suggested that he had heard of the case, only to deny all knowledge in a second conversation on the same day.

COMMENT

17. (C) We suspect that increased NGO and diplomatic attention is causing Thai officials to clam up in an attempt to let the furor die down while they figure out a graceful way to resolve this problem. It is possible that some members of the group were sent back to Laos--possibly without GoL concurrence--while others are still in detention in Nong Khai. We hope to have better success in tracking down the truth after the holidays.

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